

# CU's first black player dies at 72

## Lewis endured harsh racism on road trips in pre-Civil Rights era

Camera staff report  
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted: 06/29/2011 12:08:23 AM MDT

Billy Lewis, the first African-American to play in a varsity basketball game for the University of Colorado, died on June 14 at his home in Atlanta. He was 72.

Lewis, who was a three-year letterman in the late 1950s, finished his career with 244 points and 197 rebounds. His career high of 21 points in a game came against Nebraska as a junior.

Lewis, whose funeral was Monday in Denver, was inducted into the Colorado Athletic Hall of Fame in 2008.

Lewis graduated from Manual High School in the spring of 1956, and enrolled at CU that September. At that time, freshmen were ineligible to play so he made his debut in the 1957-58 season. Though treated well in Boulder, he often had to endure harsh racism on the road in pre-Civil Rights America and thus helped blaze the trail for all those who would follow him to CU.

As a student, he became the first African-American elected by the student body as commissioner of the Associated Students of the University of Colorado.

He led a delegation of students and testified on the resolutions against discrimination in housing and employment practices and headed the Students For Human Dignity (SFHD), two of many causes he championed that helped change CU in a positive way forever. Upon his graduation from CU in 1960, he clerked for a Denver judge, and after marrying fellow CU grad JoKatherine Holliman (the first African American woman on CU's homecoming court), they relocated to Washington, D.C., where he worked for Colorado senator Peter Dominic in 1963-64, while earning his Juris Doctor of Law degree from Howard University.

In 1964, he was recruited by IBM and took a position as the first African-American corporate attorney at the company's headquarters in Armonk, N.Y., and returned to Colorado two years later (1966) to be the junior counsel for IBM in its Niwot offices.

After nearly making a successful bid to become a state representative in 1968 (he lost to Tom Bastien by just 100 votes), he opened a private law practice in Denver with partner Morris Cole, one of the first black law firms in Colorado. He would go on to serve as general counsel at Howard University and then vice president of government relations for the Putney Hospital Group in Albany, Ga.

Born in Kansas City, Mo., in 1938, Lewis is survived by both his first wife and his second wife, Pauline Dickinson. He was the father of four, Cynthia, Hank, Michael and the late Leslye Mundy, and is survived by six grandchildren, Taylor Cheek-Mundy, Alva Robertson, Wesley and James Lewis, Nina and Hughes Mundy, two sisters, Mary Ellen Russell and Carol Ann Sanderson; nephews Shawn Sanderson and Todd Russell; niece Heather Russell; stepchildren, Joseph, Craig and Kyle Shields and their five children.

Close Window

Send To Printer

# denverpost.com

THE DENVER POST

obituary

## Billy Lewis, CU's first black basketball player, dies at 72

By Irv Moss  
*The Denver Post*

Posted: 06/29/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

Billy Lewis, who became the first African-American basketball player at the University of Colorado, died this month in his home in Atlanta. He was 72.

His sister, Mary Ellen Russell of Minneapolis, said Lewis died of cardiac arrest June 14.

Lewis was an accomplished player when he came out of Denver's Manual High School in 1956. His first varsity game at CU was in the 1957-58 season. However, his college career didn't blossom, though he played for three seasons.

After graduation in 1960, Lewis earned a law degree from Howard University and rose to prominence in the legal field. He was a corporate attorney for IBM.

During an interview with The Denver Post in February 2008, Lewis said his diminished role as a basketball player at CU had caused him a great deal of anguish. For 40 years, he blamed CU coach Sox Walseth for his problems on the basketball floor.

Before Walseth died Jan. 28, 2004, he talked with Lewis.

"It was a difficult telephone call for me to make," Lewis told The Post in 2008. "But it turned out to be one of the most emotional and pivotal things in my life. He (Walseth) said, 'Billy, I didn't do a good job coaching you.' I told him how much that meant to me. But I said that I probably had not played up to my abilities. Sometimes players believe their abilities are greater than they actually are."

As a student, Lewis was the first African-American elected by the student body as commissioner of the Associated Students of the University of Colorado. He also led students and testified on the resolutions against discrimination in housing and employment practices.

Lewis was inducted into the CU Sports Hall of Fame in October 2008.

Services were Monday at the Caldwell-Kirk Mortuary in Denver and burial was at the Highland Memorial Gardens in Thornton.

*Irv Moss: 303-954-1296 or [imoss@denverpost.com](mailto:imoss@denverpost.com)*



Send flowers  
for any occasion  
Bouquets  
from \$19.99<sup>+s/h</sup>

ProFlowers<sup>®</sup>  
Offer ONLY available at:  
[proflowers.com/happy](http://proflowers.com/happy)  
or call 1.877.804.1133

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™